

Ski North America

In the first of our new series of ski guides, **Gabriella Le Breton** reports from across the Atlantic, where top-class resorts are offering remarkable deals

While skiing in North America might not seem very credit crunch-friendly at first glance, look closer and you'll find that it's more affordable than expected. This is largely thanks to the bigger tour operators, which offer excellent-value deals that include flights and transfers. And for those who do brave the transatlantic flight, America's fabled empty, wide open, tree-lined corduroy slopes await. Combine these with reliable snow, non-existent lift queues, excellent ski tuition, consistently high levels of service and dining, both on and off the mountain, and you'll soon forget any jet lag.

BEST FOR ECO-FRIENDLY SKIING: CALIFORNIA

Led by the flamboyant Governor Arnold Schwarzenegger, California has fully embraced sustainable politics and is pioneering ecotourism in America. Californian ski resorts are genuinely committed to minimising the environmental impact of winter sports and adhere wholeheartedly to restrictions on snowmaking, construction, trail preparation and public transport.

The tiny resort of Badger Pass in the spectacular Yosemite National Park abides by some of the strictest rules of any ski resort in the world – it's only allowed to stay open for three months each winter, artificial snowmaking is banned and the resort's 10 runs have been created naturally, with no logging or clearance permitted.

The seven ski resorts that make up the Lake Tahoe ski area (including Heavenly, Squaw Valley and Kirkwood) pride themselves on keeping Tahoe blue – the water

in the lake is as clean as that in the lakes of Yosemite. The resorts work together with local government and businesses to achieve tough environmental goals, with successful projects that include treating water run-off from car parks and offsetting CO₂ emissions by purchasing renewable power units.

☎ *Ski Independence* (0845 310 3030; www.ski-i.com) offers a

seven-night b&b package to the *Inn by the Lake in Heavenly* from £759 per person, based on two sharing and including United Airlines flights departing from London to Reno and transfers to the resort. Further information on skiing in California at www.visitcalifornia.co.uk.

BEST FOR SNOW: UTAH

On average, Utah receives over 42 feet of snow each winter, with annual falls of nearly 58ft over the past two winters. Compare these figures with the average annual snowfall in most European resorts (17-25ft) and add the fact that snow in Utah is some of the driest, lightest and fluffiest in the world and you can appreciate why resorts such as Alta, Snowbird and Brighton are the place of

off-piste skiing legend.

However, there's more to Utah than steep, deep powder heaven – it's home to 13 ski resorts, 11 of which are within an hour's drive of Salt Lake City, facilitating easy exploration from a cosmopolitan base. British visitor numbers to Park City increased hugely last winter, thanks to its excellent family facilities; the luxurious Deer Valley resort rates among the most exclusive in North America; and the aptly named and highly

underrated Powder Mountain is one of America's largest ski areas, offering some of the world's most affordable snowcat skiing.

☎ *Ski Safari* (01273 224060; www.skisafari.com) offers seven nights' b&b in the Park City Peaks hotel

from £885 per person, including return United Airlines flight and transfers departing January 7 2010. Book seven nights' b&b at the Hotel Park City by October 31, 2009, and save £600 per person, staying in a luxurious suite from £1,495 per person, including flights and transfers. Further information on skiing in Utah at www.skiutah.com.

BEST FOR LUXURY: COLORADO

While Colorado is home to some genuinely down-to-earth ski resorts like Telluride and Breckenridge, it is best known for the glitz and glamour of its star resorts: Aspen/Snowmass, Vail and Beaver Creek. These three "grandes dames" of the ski world are located within about 100 miles of each other and offer virtually

unparalleled levels of luxury and service in addition to world-class skiing and tuition for all levels.

In keeping with their exclusive reputations, Aspen and Vail vie for the title of "most expensive ski pass in the world", with "the Beav" not far behind. However, in return you can expect immaculately groomed trails, resort ambassadors to show you around the slopes, complimentary sun cream, cookies and drinks, slick, efficient lift systems and minimal queues. In resort, high-end accommodation is par for the course and gourmet restaurants, chic boutiques and trendy bars and clubs are a dime a dozen.



Given the tough economic climate, resorts and operators are currently offering some remarkable deals, making this winter the best time to treat yourself to a visit to these resorts. **Ski Independence** (0845 310 3030; www.ski-i.com) offers a seven-night package to the fully-catered *Parmigan Chalet in Vail* from £1,195 per person, including return British Airways flight from London Heathrow to Denver and shared shuttle transfers to the resort. Further information on skiing in Colorado at www.coloradoski.com.

BEST FOR BEAUTY: ALBERTA, CANADA

If you want to ski amid acres of raw, spectacular natural beauty, you could do worse than head for the ski resorts of Alberta. Located within Banff National Park, the slopes of Banff's three resorts – Lake Louise Mountain Resort, Sunshine and Mount Norquay – boast sensational views and a palpable sense of being in the heart of a wilderness. As you explore the gladed trails and dramatic backcountry bowls, you half expect an elk to step out from the forest and amble past you.

Some 200 miles north of Banff lies Jasper National Park, home to the town of Jasper and Marmot Basin ski resort. Jasper is a quirky, earthy town and with the exception of the Fairmont Jasper Park Lodge hotel, luxury is hard to find. Marmot's ski terrain is split evenly between all ski abilities and it's one of the least crowded resorts of its size in the world – on weekdays on average 1,000 skiers roam the 1,675-acre ski area, meaning more than one acre of winter wonderland per skier. On "busy" days, you will have to share your acre with one other skier.

Frontier Ski (020 8776 8709; www.frontier-ski.co.uk) offers seven nights' b&b in the centrally located *Banff Inn* for £685 or seven nights' room-only accommodation in the *Fairmont Banff Springs* for £942, including flights and transfers, departing January 7, 2010 (book by November 15, 2009). Further

information on skiing in Alberta at www.travelalberta.com.

BEST FOR DEDICATED SKIERS: BRITISH COLUMBIA

Kicking Horse, Big White, Fernie, Revelstoke, Red – these names will send ripples of excitement through any ski fan, bringing to mind visions of long virgin powder runs, snowcat skiing, heliskiing and "ski safari" road trips. However, for most recreational skiers, they'll mean very little, which is not so much a reflection of the lack of terrain suitable for beginner and intermediate skiers but more of the current lack of in-resort facilities when compared with other North American resorts.

The obvious exception to this rule is Whistler, which attracts more British skiers than any other resort in North America and will be hosting the Winter Olympics this winter.

Whistler boasts two large mountains, Whistler and Blackcomb, which were joined by the Peak2Peak gondola last winter. Together the two mountains provide wide, rolling pistes for novices and intermediates, accessible, world-class off-piste terrain and three well-maintained snowparks. Whistler ticks all the "ski town" boxes too – a good range of accommodation, plenty of restaurants and shops, lively nightlife and good transport links to Vancouver airport.

Nonstop Ski (0845 365 1525; www.nonstopski.com) offers a two-week BC snow safari to Fernie, Revelstoke, Big White, Red and Kicking Horse, from £1,942 per person, including b&b, return flight to Calgary, transport, seven days' coaching and an 11-day ski pass. Further information on skiing in British Columbia at www.britishcolumbia.com/ski/.

ONLINE

Expert advice on cutting the cost of your ski holiday

telegraph.co.uk/ski



As you explore the gladed trails and dramatic backcountry bowls, you half expect an elk to step out from the forest and amble past you



Dedicated skiers' secret: Fernie Alpine Resort in British Columbia

HENRY GEORG/SCOTT MARKWITZ/GETTY IMAGES



Snowed under: Utah offers some of the driest, fluffiest trails in the world